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ABSTRACT

The components of the self system include self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Learning that adds to identity augments self-concept. Learning that leads to self-appraisal relates to self-esteem. Learning that leads to prediction of achievement belongs to self-efficacy. Courage to persist when confronted by a "Gulp!" experience provides an understanding of self. The knowledge of self provides the material for self-affirmations, which add information to one or more components of the self system. Consequently, one feels good about one's self. If self-esteem issues are at the root of many problems disrupting couples' relationships, why not attack self-esteem head-on? Almost from the beginning of the counseling the partners speak directly to one another. In Guerney's "Relationship Enhancement" (1977) couples focus on improving conflict-resolution through communication skills training. They do not use the counselor as a conduit for their messages. The counselor is like an orchestra conductor, leading the partners through difficult passages. When one partner has completed her or his message, and the other has demonstrated empathic listening, the two switch roles. The active listener demonstrates that he or she has heard, not necessarily agrees with, what the partner has said by repeating what the expresser has said. (ABL)

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The Family Letter

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National Academy of Counselors and Family Therapists
Volume 12, Number 4-5, 1992

Self-Esteem and Couples Counseling

by Anthony T. Palisi, Ed.D.

ED344177

The purpose of this Family Letter is two-fold. We implicate low self-esteem as a key to many couples' relationship problems. Then, we examine an approach to relationship enhancement, which while focusing on communication improvement and problem-solving, is a vehicle for improving partners' self-worth.

First, we briefly review the self system. Next, we place on parallel continua the concepts of *power* and *love*, using levels of self-regard as a connection between the two. Next, we list some conditions which both involve self-esteem and jeopardize relationships. Finally, we discuss current views about elevating self-worth and relate these ideas to the steps in Guerney's relationship enhancement program.

That's your map through this edition. Let's begin, then, with the self system, particularly its components: *self concept, self-esteem* and *self-efficacy*.

Self-concept is learned. We have no evidence to the contrary.

We learn each time we say "*yes*" to opportunities presented to us by life. We say "*yes*" despite intensifying anxiety which accompanies us into what previously we tabbed as "*Gulp!*" experiences, those which, in some way, test our mettle. We may emerge from these experiences with knowledge new to us or with newly-acquired skills. We also emerge with learning that adds to various parts of the self system.

Learning that adds to our identity augments our *self-concept*. Learning that leads to self-appraisal relates to our *self-esteem*. Learning that leads to prediction of achievement belongs to *self-efficacy*.

So, by way of examples, we might declare: "I learned Latin from study throughout high school and college" (self-concept); "I translate Latin as well as anyone with a background similar to mine" (self-esteem), or "I expect to learn modern romance languages easily because of my proficiency with Latin" (self-efficacy).

Our courage to face --or our cowardice in the face of-- "Gulp!" experiences places us somewhere on a continuum where one pole is *power* and its counterpart is *powerlessness*. The implied scale of power refers both to our sense of mastery, or lack thereof, and to our ability or inability to influence others.

Our sense of personal power affects the way we relate to others. Amidon and his associates (1992) speak of the link between *control* and *intimacy*. May (1969, 1972) first talks of *will* and *love* and then of *power* and *love*. Control and will and power: if they are not same, then, at least, they are kissing cousins.

Amidon and his colleagues and May contend that *power* and *love* are distinct, but not mutually exclusive concepts. Instead, *power* and *love* run parallel courses. (See Figure 1.) A link between the two is our self system. That system develops or deteriorates depending on which part of us, the courageous or the cowardly, shows up when "Gulp!" experiences present themselves.

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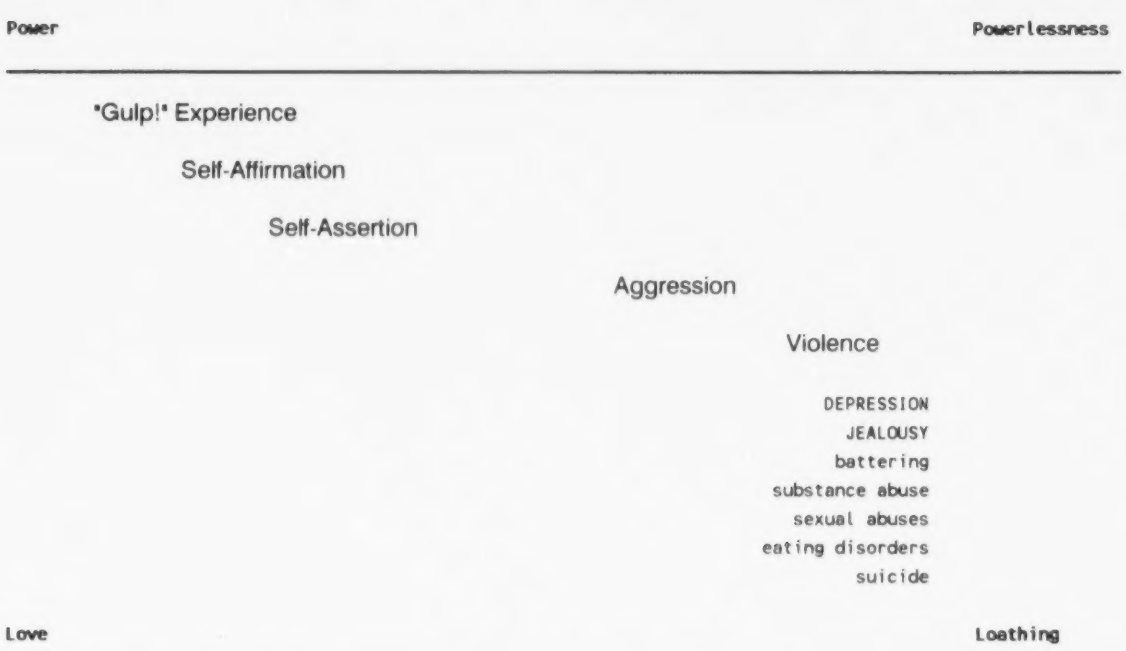
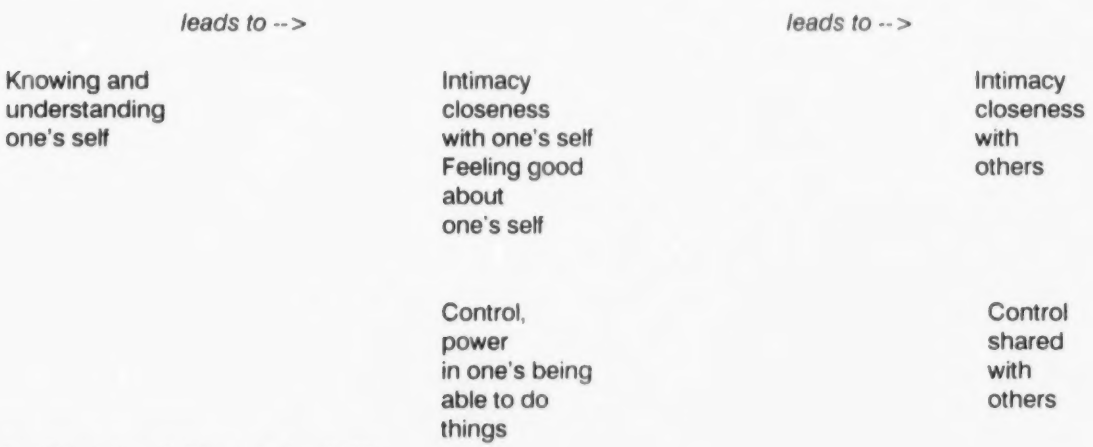
Figure 1



Adapted from May (1972)

Figure 2


leads to -->
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Knowing and understanding one's self
Intimacy closeness with one's self Feeling good about one's self
Intimacy closeness with others
Control, power in one's being able to do things
Control shared with others

Reprinted from Amidon, et al. (1992)

So, each time we say "yes" to our "Gulp!" opportunities, the lesson learned adds at least to our identity. We come away affirming, "This is who I am."

Affirmations of this quality lead to the understanding of one's self (Figure 2). In that understanding is both a sense of *power* and self-*love*, the latter of the quality described by Assagioli (1973, p.92): ". . . if we love what is higher and best in ourselves, what we *are* essentially, if we love our potentialities for growth, development, creative ability and communion with others, then this love . . . urges us to live a life of higher quality."

Figure 1, a depiction of ideas offered by May (1972) and Figure 2, reprinted from Amidon and his associates, both speak to the parallel but kindred concepts of *power* and *love*. In what follows, we move from one figure to the other, and back again.

(Note: May developed his ideas as a way to explain violence in our times. For May, the polar opposite of loving is neither hate nor loathing, as shown here, but apathy. Family Letter (Palisi, 1990, V.10, N.5) originally adapted his ideas to discuss couples' communication.)

Self-affirmation (Figure 1) is a manifestation of the self-understanding derived from persisting in Gulp!" experiences. It is the step that makes possible "Intimacy and closeness with one's self" (Figure 2). In turn, feeling good about our self gives us the sense of power, i.e. knowledge that we are able to do things. Self-knowledge is the prerequisite for self-assertion -- for informing others about our wants, wishes, needs, and/or intentions.

Self-assertion (Figure 1), as we speak of it here, complements our "communion with others." Self-assertion, which is a statement about our self rather than a demand for others to act, intends to draw us closer to, not push us against nor away from others.

The drawing closer occurs because we tell others clearly who we are, i.e. what are our intentions, what we think we need and/or what we would like. The self-assertion puts to rest the need for others to engage in *mind-reading* when in communion with us. When we are closer to others we often find it easier to share control with them (Figure 2).

Let's summarize to this point. Our courage to persist when confronted by a "Gulp!" experience provides us with an understanding of self. The knowledge of self provides the material for self-affirmations, which add information to one or more components of the self-system: self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy. Consequently, we feel good about our self.

Clearer about our own emerging identity, we are now in a better position through self-assertion to let others know us. That kind of self-disclosure often produces feelings of closeness with others. Feeling close to others, we are more willing to share control with them.

Is it all theory?

Preliminary findings, reported by the Amidon group, indicate that when you locate a person who values *one* factor from among the following, in all likelihood, you have located a person who values all of the factors: positive attitude toward self-love, close relations with others, feeling in control of one's self, and sharing control with others.

What happens when we shrink from or abandon too soon those "Gulp!" experiences? Listen to Maslow (1971, p.36):

"If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life. You will be evading your own capacities, your own possibilities."

The unhappiness of which Maslow speaks may begin as aggression (Figure 1) turned toward the self. Or aggression can be

turned on those who urge us to accept as challenge more than as threat those "Gulp!" experiences from which we shrink. Or, aggression can be directed eventually toward those who would seduce us --for whatever their reason-- to be less than we are capable of being.

Our sense of power ebbs and self-love dissipates, rolling us back toward self-loathing. When aggression fails to restore power and self-love, as almost always it does, then violence often presents itself, masquerading as our only option.

In relationships, violence directed toward self or others can take many forms, a few among them being: depression, jealousy, battering, property destruction, substance abuse, sexual abuses, eating disorders, infidelity, abandonment, suicide and murder. When we resort to violence, we are in the position of powerlessness; we are at the nadir of our self-worth.

Mounting evidence implicates low self-esteem in depression (see Beck, Rush, Shaw & Emery, 1979), and in jealousy (see references cited in Palisi, 1992, V.12, N.1-2).

Additionally, pathognomic denial in chemical abuse, in anorexia and in bulimia, for example, by definition speak to distortions of self-knowledge. Often, we hear the substance-addicted person propound the hollow assertion, "I can quit anytime I want to." He or she holds to an illusion of power when his or her reality is one of powerlessness. He or she boasts of abundance in self-worth when the reality is bankruptcy.

From the Amidon and associates research previously mentioned, other preliminary evidence suggests that the person who resists close relationships with others probably will also devalue self-knowledge and will experience a low level of self-control. Family Letter interprets violence to reflect low levels of self-control. Prolonged aggressive, violent responses --signs low self esteem-- shred relationships. An early and continuing sign of relationships in disarray is aggressive and often abusive exchanges of words.

More torpedoes than abuse and violence sink relationships. How about those relationships which end because one partner reveals that he or she no longer loves or no longer desires physical intimacy with the spouse? Family Letter (see Palisi, 1991) discussed those issues previously, but recall that the thread of self-esteem runs through them, as well.

If self-esteem issues are at the root of many problems disrupting couples' relationships, why not attack self-esteem head-on? For many, not all, the answer has been supplied by Branden (1990, p. 14) who holds:

"We cannot work on self-esteem directly, neither our own nor anyone else's, because self-esteem is *a consequence* --a product of internally generated practices."

Branden identifies six practices, which when and to the extent that they are an integral part of a person's life, self-esteem is enhanced. These practices are: (1) living consciously, (2) accepting self, (3) assuming self-responsibility, (4) asserting self, (5) living purposefully and (6) maintaining integrity.

Walz & Bleuer (1991) follow a similar line of thought, presenting nine personal initiatives for enhancing self-esteem: (1) appreciate your uniqueness, (2) connect with others, (3) be goal driven, (4) strive to achieve, (5) act courageously, (6) respond with resilience, (7) live your values, (8) value your spirituality and (9) release your creativity.

While not addressing self-esteem specifically, Peck (1978) says that four disciplines are necessary for solving life's problems: (1) delay gratification, (2) accept responsibility, (3) dedicate to reality, and (4) maintain balance in life.

If Branden is correct in assuming that we cannot work directly on our own or others self-esteem issues, where does that leave the counse-

lor who believes these issues to be implicated in many relationship problems? An answer would seem to be that the counseling would have to include Branden's practices, Walz & Bleuer's initiative and/or Peck's disciplines.

A number of programs described by L'Abate & McHenry (1983) seem to fit the bill. (See, for example, Alberti & Emmons; Miller, Nunnally & Wackman; Guerney.) We select Guerney's program for review here because of our familiarity with it. Our intention is first to describe the relationship enhancement program and later to show its correspondence to self-esteem work in the manner recommended by Branden, by Walz & Bleuer, and by Peck.

On the face of it, Guerney's Relationship Enhancement seems to focus on improving conflict-resolution through communication skills training. And, in our experience, couples who work through the program do handle conflict better, whether or not they decide to stay together.

Guerney emphasizes a method of communication. Couples who come into counseling often fail to follow the ordinary courtesies of conversation. Partners interrupt one another; they may be verbally abusive toward one another.

Yet, most people will acknowledge that under certain conditions failing to heed communication protocol leads only to chaos. So, we invoke protocols, for example, raising our hand to be recognized before speaking in a group, or speaking one at a time.

Relationship Enhancement establishes communication protocols: an *active listener*, who, for the most part, may not interrupt, and an *expresser*, who follows a prescribed format in making her or his presentation.

Almost from the very beginning of the counseling, the partners speak directly to one another. They do not use the counselor as a conduit for their messages. The counselor is like an orchestra conductor, leading the partners through difficult passages.

When one partner has completed her or his message, and the other has demonstrated empathic listening, the two switch roles.

The active listener demonstrates that he or she has heard, not necessarily agrees with, what the partner has said by repeating what the expresser has said.

Because it's the expresser who stipulates the problem to be discussed, he or she can anticipate from experience how the spouse will react. The expresser begins by demonstrating empathy for the partner's position. So the expresser might say, "I know that this is a sensitive, potentially hurtful area for you. You believe that much, if not all, of what we do recreationally should be undertaken together."

Even before the problem has been stated, the active listener hears in the expresser's empathic beginning a recognition of him or her as person. The empathic beginning also serves as a reminder to the expresser of how the partner has reacted. It is the expresser's responsibility to maintain an interpersonal climate more supportive than defensive. Armed with the reminder, the expresser can more easily present her or his ideas gracefully.

Then, the expresser states the core issue. Guerney encourages the expresser to see himself or herself as *the world's leading authority* on how he or she views the problem. The core problem might be stated, as follows: "As I see it, a husband and wife should have social networks separate from the one they share as a couple. This means that occasionally each partner will be involved recreationally with others, not including the spouse."

Next, the expresser describes his or her own emotional response to the situation. Thus,the expresser might continue: "I feel guilty because you're hurt by this suggestion. I'm confused by what seems to be your apparent lack of trust. I'm resentful of giving up relationships with people I like but who you don't particularly enjoy."

Now, the expresser must "see the good" in her or his partner's position. The expresser might add, by example,"I recognize that your wanting to be with me also speaks to the value you place on the relationship. I appreciate deeply your wanting us to share so much."

Then, the expresser, for purposes of illumination and not for blaming, cites specific examples that relate to the core problem. Specificities eliminate the defense-inducing, "You always . . ." and "You never . . ." statements. So, the expresser might say, "Last week, when I said I wanted to watch the basketball tournament with some of my former teammates, you showed exasperation. Tuesday, when I brought upon for discussion the possibility of my joining a bowling league, you said you wouldn't talk about it."

Finally, the expresser proposes a solution to the core problem. "I'd like us to agree first on an amount of time that we might engage in activities independent from one another, and then I'd like us to list activities which each of us is comfortable in having the partner engage in."

Both in the active listening and expresser modes, the spouses are, in Branden's terms, involving themselves with those internally generated *practices*, the product of which is self-esteem enhancement. In both active listener and expresser modes, each spouse lives consciously.

In stating the core problem, expressing his or her own emotions, and in proposing a solution, the expresser follows the *practices* of: accepting self, assuming self-responsibility, asserting self, living purposefully and maintaining integrity. Several of Walz & Bleuer's initiatives parallel Branden's practices.

By expressing empathy for and seeing the good in the partner, the expresser, in Walz & Bleuer's terms, connects with the spouse.

The active listener, in Peck's terms, delays gratification and maintains a balance in life by respecting another person's right to see the world through her or his own eyes. For Walz & Bleuer, the active listener acts courageously and connects with the other.

The active listener's non-judgmental stance encourages in the expresser to know and understand the self. Amidon and his associates believe that such understanding leads first to positive feelings about the self and then to a sense of mastery in being able to communicate. In turn, the non-judgmental climate encourages the further exploration of self, the antecedent of feeling close to another and of the desire to share control with that person.

The expresser's willingness to address a problem itself can be considered a "Gulp!" experience. The expresser's format encourages graceful self-affirmation and self-assertion, keeping the expresser closer to the power and loving poles.

The system that Guerney has built incorporates many of the practices and many of the initiatives the experts say leads to self-esteem enhancement. The system fits well into the models developed by May and Amidon and his associates. So, while learning graceful communication and problem-solving, the couple should also experience an increment in self-esteem.

But, suppose you disagree with Branden's thesis that you cannot work directly on your own or another's self-esteem? Recently, Bednar and his associates (1990) took a stance quite opposite that of Branden. They advanced the position that the client's positive self-talk is the most critical element in enhancing self-esteem. Further, the group holds that other two factors develop self-esteem: (1) an honest, appropriate disclosure of self to others, and (2) a willingness to persist in efforts to cope with the challenges that day-to-day living presents.

Counselors following the Bednar group's plan first determine which factor(s),

impression management and/or capitulating to anxiety, is the client's pattern. Then, each time the counselor observes the client breaking the pattern *in session*, the counselor elicits from the client positive self-talk about the change.

Guerney's program affords the counselor opportunities to elicit such positive self-statements from both the active listener and the expresser.

For example, an expresser, whose pattern has been impression management, would be asked how she or he felt in presenting her or his position directly and gracefully. Or, an active listener's whose anxiety has interfered with her or his accurate understanding of the partner's position may be asked by the counselor how she or he feels after hearing that the play-back is accurate.

Guerney seems to eschew interpretation. So, he himself might not be so tolerant of the Bednar group's identifying for the partners the counterproductive, self-esteem deflating pattern(s) that one or both use. Because he uses considerable verbal and non-verbal positive reinforcement when the partners follow the protocols, he probably would not object too strenuously to the counselor's eliciting of positive, client-self talk.

In our view, the Bednar group's approach can be incorporated without violating Guerney's protocol. So the couples' counselor winds up with the Branden practices, Walz & Bleuer initiatives, Peck disciplines as probable outcomes of using the Guerney approach. By adding the Bednar group's approach, the counselor has a double-barreled attack on self-esteem issues, as well as helping the couple to deal with the problem which they identify as causing difficulty in the relationship.

Those interested in further investigation of Guerney's approach can contact him, B.J. Guerney, Jr., Ph.D., at Individual and Family Consultation Center, Beecher House, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802. Guerney offers excellent training seminars around the country, marathon training at Penn State and most recently is putting together a home-study program.

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Open Letter

Perhaps we have 'outgrown' our status in title of Academy and more rightly should be assuming the broader, more inclusive status of 'college'; and accordingly I would like to canvass our membership for a change (upgrade, I assume) to *National (or American) College of Counselors and Family Therapists.*

This would mean more than a mere change in name. It may well be an infusion of newer insights, added membership, a certification/licensure process, an improved posture of our organization overall.

I know it will mean a change in literature, letterheads, etc.; but we can consider NACFT as affiliated with the National/American College, with the College umbrella under which the NAFL and NACF would still function until we are finally ready to relinquish the names fully.

I envisage added prestige to our organization as a College, even without the need for supplemental papers of incorporation. Inn time, in fact, I would wish incorporation of the American College of Counselors as a certifying body (by charter) with an NCCFT, with a continuum of the functions of the NACF however added to, enhanced by, and broadened in scope to embrace diverse counselors and family therapists.

Yours sincerely,

Hirsch L. Silverman, Ph.D.

Dr. Silverman is the National Director of the National Academy of Counselors & Family Therapists. The American College of Counselors, to which he refers, is a legal entity associated with NACFT.

The Family Letter

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